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‘THIS HAPPY NONENTITY’
HAZLITT, HUME, AND THE ESSAY

Tim Milnes

Recent studies of the philosophical character of the Romantic familiar essay have situated the genre within the conventions of Romantic aesthetic theory. Uttara Natarajan, for instance, depicts the development of the familiar essay as part of the Romantic project to unify poetry and philosophy, arguing that ‘[t]he romantic essay shares with romantic poetry, an aesthetic founded upon the attempt, or [...] the failure, to represent the infinite through finite means.’¹ In a similar vein, David Duff has drawn attention to the way in which the digressive, paratactic, and impressionistic epistemology of the familiar essay models itself upon Romantic poetics. The essay’s performance of its ‘half-knowledge,’ its reflexive self-theorisation through practice, he finds, ‘only comes to full power, and full understanding of itself, through the stimulus of Romantic lyric.’² Viewed from perspectives such as these, the Romantic familiar essay appears as the product of a merging of British empiricism with a new, nascent idealism, what Natarajan calls a ‘symbiosis of the experiential and the ideal,’ itself a ‘hallmark of British as distinct from German idealism.’³ Thus, the prosateur Romantic essayist, like his poetic counterpart, subordinates the senses to the mind as a means of exploring the ‘experiential’ through an aesthetics of sublimity.

Running parallel to these approaches is a tendency to represent the Romantic essay’s unification of the poetic and the philosophical as the fulfilment of an eighteenth-century quest for a form of cultural communication that bridged the worlds of the quotidian and the intellectual. This aspiration is encapsulated by David Hume in his unpublished essay, ‘Of Essay-Writing’, in which the essayist assumes the role of a cultural diplomat between the worlds of learning and polite conversation:

Learning has been as great a Loser by being shut up in Colleges and Cells, and secluded from the World and good Company. By that Means, every Thing of what we call *Belles Lettres* became totally barbarous, being cultivated by Men without any Taste of Life or Manners, and without that Liberty and Facility of Thought and

¹ Uttara Natarajan, ‘The Veil of Familiarity: Romantic Philosophy and the Familiar Essay,’ *Studies in Romanticism* 42.1 (spring 2003), 27-44: 31.

² David Duff, ‘Charles Lamb’s Art of Intimation,’ *Wordsworth Circle* 43.3 (summer 2012), 127-34:133.

³ Natarajan, ‘The Veil of Familiarity’, 31.

Expression, which can only be acquir'd by Conversation. Even Philosophy went to Wrack by this moaping recluse Method of Study, and became as chimerical in her Conclusions as she was unintelligible in her Stile and Manner of Delivery. And indeed, what cou'd be expected from Men who never consulted Experience in any of their Reasonings, or who never search'd for that Experience, where alone it is to be found, in common Life and Conversation?

[...] In this View, I cannot but consider myself as a Kind of Resident or Ambassador from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation [...]⁴

With its amenability to tentative, unmethodical improvisation and friendly conversation, the familiar essay seemed to fit an image of thought based on the same custom, habit and sentiment embodied by Hume's picture of a decentred, trusting intersubjectivity. For Hume, essaying as an activity eschews the quest for certainty and instead fosters an idea of 'experience' as an experimental activity in which the mind comes to reshape itself through its engagement with human life in 'the common course of the world.' Here, Hume is treading on what would have been familiar ground for most of his readers. Since the days of *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*, the periodical essay had functioned as both medium and metaphor for the open, egalitarian and polite discursiveness of the public sphere. Indeed, Addison and Steele actively exploited the essay's potential to move amphibiously across boundaries, between philosophical and literary modes of expression, as well as between academic and informal writing. Thus, in *The Spectator* no. 10, Addison declares his intention to emulate Socrates, who 'brought Philosophy down from Heaven, to inhabit among Men,' by bringing 'Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-tables, and in Coffee-houses.'⁵

It is, then, tempting to see the Romantic aestheticisation of the familiar essay as an extension of the practices of the periodical essayists of an earlier era. Thus, while Addison and Hume endeavoured to broaden intellectual culture by essayistically mediating between 'study' and 'conversation,' the Romantic essay's attempt to synthesise poetry and philosophy promises to achieve on a formal level the performance of familiarity and communicability that its eighteenth-century precursors could only describe. Consequently (according to Natarajan), Hume's model of the essayist as ambassador between the realms of learning and

⁴ David Hume, 'Of Essay-Writing,' *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary 1741-77*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, rev. ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 534-5.

⁵ Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), I, 44.

conversation is fully realised only by Hazlitt's essayistic *practice*, by his Romantic incorporation of the conversability hypothesised in Hume's essays into the very voice of the essayist. Hazlitt certainly appears to have something like this in mind in his 1825 Advertisement to the Paris edition of *Table Talk*. Here, he claims that one of the aims of the volume was to embody at a *stylistic* level the conversational ideals of the eighteenth-century essay:

I had remarked that when I had written or thought upon a particular topic, and afterwards had occasion to speak of it with a friend, the conversation generally took a much wider range, and branched off into a number of indirect and collateral questions, which were not strictly connected with the original view of the subject, but which often threw a curious and striking light upon it, or upon human life in general. It therefore occurred to me as possible to combine the advantages of these two styles, the *literary* and *conversational*; or after stating and enforcing some leading idea, to follow it up by such observations and reflections as would probably suggest themselves in discussing the same questions in company with others. This seemed to me to promise a greater variety and richness, and perhaps a greater sincerity, than could be attained by a more precise and scholastic method. The same consideration had an influence on the familiarity and conversational idiom of the style which I have used.⁶

And yet, reading Hazlitt's essays in this way runs the risk of overlooking one important respect in which Hazlitt's essayistic theory and practice ran counter to that of Addison and Hume. Indeed, the intellectual bridge between Hume and Hazlitt is dwarfed by the gulf that separates them.

To appreciate this, we need to distinguish between two contemporary aesthetic models: the aesthetics of the *sublime* and the aesthetics of the *liminal*. Like its eighteenth-century predecessor, the Romantic essay is generically ambiguous, inhabiting a marginal cultural territory between the disciplinary categories of science and philosophy and the imaginative pleasures afforded by literary arts such as poetry and fiction. Unlike its Enlightenment precursor, however, the Romantic essay is presented with two different ways of exploiting this marginality. On one hand, in a Humean spirit of consensualism, it can

⁶ William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930-34), VIII, 333.

attempt to negotiate cultural differences; on the other, by invoking a reinvigorated faculty of imagination, it can seek to transcend them. This dilemma manifests itself in the Romantic essay as a tension between quotidian liminality and sublime transcendence: between, on one hand, the engagement in the pragmatic diplomacy of communication, and, on the other, the exertion of power manifested as an incommensurable ‘aesthetic’ experience.

The distinction I allude to here is further illuminated by Ian Duncan’s account of the two fundamental ways in which literary works of this period endeavour to negotiate the blurred boundary between fiction and reality. The first mode, which Duncan describes as Kantian-transcendental or lyrical, is familiar to students of Romanticism. On this model, aesthetic experience acquires a recuperative function, compensating for the loss of epistemic foundations and their replacement with merely transcendental conditions. Accordingly, representations of the fragmented self offer a fleeting and indirect glimpse of an impossible unity. In transcendental aesthetics, ‘Literature’ becomes (potentially, at least) sublime, which is another way of saying that literature assumes a unique, asymptotic relation to the Absolute. Thus, as Friedrich Schlegel writes of ‘transcendental poetry’ in Fragment 238 of the *Athenäum Fragments*, Literature ‘emerges as satire in the absolute difference of ideal and real, hovers in between as elegy, and ends as idyll with the absolute identity of the two.’⁷ Transcendental lyricism remains serious (albeit nostalgically so) about truth—offering the prospect of an aesthetic resolution of human division in the dark foundations of Schelling’s intellectual intuition, or in the form of an ineffable ‘Literary Absolute.’⁸

Duncan, however, also identifies a second major aesthetic paradigm: a Humean-empirical or novelistic aesthetic, which remains poised between truth and fiction with no projected foundation beyond that of the goal of cultivating consensus through conversation.⁹ On this model, the representational power of literature is deflated. Thus, for a rhetorically-minded ironist such as Hume, literature simply helps to promote and regulate communication in the public sphere by mediating between different forms of life (primarily, the reflective and the quotidian). Such diplomacy was exemplified by the essay, which, as cultural mediator

⁷ Friedrich Schlegel, ‘From *Athenäum Fragments*,’ *The Origins of Modern Critical Thought: German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism from Lessing to Hegel*, ed. by David Simpson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 195.

⁸ See F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. by Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978). Answering the question of how the subjective is to become objective, i.e. how intuition can intuit itself, Schelling claims that ‘[t]his universally acknowledged and altogether incontestable objectivity of intellectual intuition is art itself. For the aesthetic intuition simply is the intellectual intuition become objective.’ (228)

⁹ See Ian Duncan, *Scott’s Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 124.

par excellence, moved harmoniously between the worlds of earnest philosophising and polite conversation. For Hume, the essayistic imagination involved a performative doubling of personae and perspectives, a form of open-ended mediating between the systematic understanding of the philosopher and the pragmatic diplomacy of the conversationalist in the lifeworld. The goal of this activity was the consolidation of social, and, ultimately, epistemological norms. My suggestion here then, is that Duncan's distinction between transcendental and empirical aesthetics (what I refer to, respectively, as the sublime and the liminal) in the Romantic novel is also helpful for reflecting upon what is at stake, epistemologically and rhetorically, in the Romantic familiar essay.

The shift from a liminal aesthetics of mediation and consolidation to a sublime aesthetics of transcendence is, in part, a consequence of the decline of the public sphere upon which the former depended. The epistemology of the Romantic familiar essay, no less than other, more celebrated literary forms of the Romantic period, is moulded by circumstances associated with industrial and political revolution. Jon Klancher has demonstrated the ways in which the periodical played a vital role in cultivating the idea of a public sphere by organising audiences and evoking 'a textual society unifying readers otherwise divided into hierarchic social ranks.'¹⁰ As this 'textual society' segmented into political factions whose interests and world-views appeared unbridgeable, however, the figure of the sympathetic, neutral spectator prized by Addison and Smith suffered a similar fate to that of the generalist man of letters. For instance, reviewing the reviews in 1824, James Mill identified the very communicability of the modern periodicals as the source of modern partisanship. For Mill, the responsiveness of the periodical press to public debate drove its craven adherence to political 'interests' at the cost of objectivity. 'Periodical literature depends upon *immediate* success,' Mill complains: 'It must, therefore, patronise the opinions which are now in vogue, the opinions of those who are now in power.'¹¹ Similarly, for Hazlitt, the public sphere, which had already fragmented through the expansion of print media and a rapid increase in the dissemination of knowledge, could no longer function as a foundation for epistemic solidarity.

And yet, the ground Hazlitt shares with Mill—and with the Scottish Enlightenment more generally—ends here. Hazlitt rejects utilitarian rationalism, associating the latter with a Scottish philosophy of self-interest and with the commercialisation of letters that he holds

¹⁰ Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 15.

¹¹ [James Mill], 'Periodical Literature: *Edinburgh Review*,' *Westminster Review*, 1.1 (January 1824), 206-49: 209.

responsible for glutting the public appetite with cheap printed material. In ‘The Main Chance,’ he depicts rational egoism as a form of mental commodification that fetishized a ‘certain form or outside appearance of utility’ in objects, while neglecting ‘the natural, pulpy, wholesome, nutritious substance, the principle of vitality.’ Utilitarianism—itsself, for Hazlitt, the philosophy of an aggregative, purely mechanical intellect—produces a ‘frigid habit of mind [in which] the real uses of things harden and crystallise; the pith and marrow are extracted out of them, leaving nothing but the husk or shell [...]’ Moreover, since it promoted a view of well-being in which ‘the idea of property is gradually abstracted from the advantage it may be of even to ourselves,’ it was ultimately self-defeating.¹² Against this perspective, Hazlitt pits his moral idealism, his belief that the mind forms experience, and hence its own moral objectives (self-interested and disinterested alike). This in turn is rooted in his conviction that the diversity and complexity of our experience always outstrips our conceptions, and that, as he declares in *Characteristics: In the Manner of Rochefoucault’s Maxims* (1823), ‘[t]ruth is not one, but many.’¹³ The error of ‘people of sense’, such as Bentham and Shelley, is that by mistaking the abstract, rational forms that quantify experience for the ‘pith and marrow’ of the thing itself, they come to know only ‘the form, not the power of truth.’¹⁴

This reaction against the Scottish Enlightenment ideal of a sociable ‘progress of sentiments’ stems, in large part, from Hazlitt’s ambivalent relationship with the print culture upon which his journalistic career depended. The material conditions of the periodical and the cultural location of the essayist had shifted in fundamental ways since the age of Hume and Johnson. Crucial to these changes was a dramatic increase in readily available information through the explosion of print media in the early nineteenth century. This, together with increasing scientific, technical and professional specialisation, led to the demise of the Enlightenment ideal of the ‘Universal Intellect’: the man of letters who was accomplished in all fields of learning. As Nathan Drake observed in 1814, knowledge had proliferated and diversified to such an extent that ‘[t]o comprehend the intricacies of *speculative* science, or to relish the *elaborate* productions of genius, requires not only the education of many years, but

¹² Hazlitt, *Works*, XVII, 277. See also: ‘On the Scotch Character,’ [*The Liberal*, January 1823]: ‘a Scotchman is a machine, and should be constructed on sound moral, and philosophical principles, or should be put a stop to altogether’ (ibid, 106).

¹³ Hazlitt, *Works*, IX, 228.

¹⁴ ‘On People of Sense,’ Hazlitt, *Works*, XII, 248.

much subsequent leisure through life [...].'¹⁵ Indeed, the demands of trade and business meant that even the leisured classes struggled to keep up:

In a country just rising into consequence by commercial efforts, where, with the exception of a few individuals devoted to an academical or professional life, the higher and middle classes are but little acquainted with the pleasures and advantages of literature [...]; it will be in vain that attention is called to philological enquiry or studied exhortation.¹⁶

Drake suggests that these cultural developments present an opportunity for the essayist. Amidst the bewildering complexities of speculative science and the productions of genius, the ideal role for the essay genre is that of a cultural aggregator. The essay, he notes, is the perfect medium for an age of commercial and communicative surplus, providing the 'higher and middle classes' with a digest of information in a world in which it is no longer possible to maintain a familiarity with every branch of knowledge.

In retrospect, Drake's vision underestimated the extent to which the rapidly changing economy of the early nineteenth century would fundamentally reshape the inner structure of the essay itself. Hazlitt, by contrast, was more alert to the need for a new paradigm for essaying. In his 1823 essay 'The Periodical Press,' he argues that modernity's surplus of knowledge called for a reconsideration of the very function of the periodical writer:

To dig to the bottom of a subject through so many generations of authors, is now impossible: the concrete mass is too voluminous and vast to be contained in any single head; and therefore we must have essences and samples as substitutes for it. We have collected a superabundance of raw materials: the grand *desideratum* now is, to fashion and render them portable.¹⁷

The key word here is 'essences.' In an era that was witnessing a superabundance of information, the essay no longer contributed to the progress of knowledge. Instead of aggregating information, Hazlitt argues, the periodical essay achieves its distinctive form of cultural autonomy by distilling the spirit of the age.

¹⁵ Nathan Drake, *Essays, Biographical, Critical and Historical, Illustrative of the Tatler, Spectator and Guardian*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (London: Suttaby, Evance, and Fox, 1814), I, 15.

¹⁶ Drake, *Essays*, I, 16.

¹⁷ Hazlitt, *Works*, XVI, 219-20.

This reconfiguration the essayist was a characteristically Romantic response to the intellectual fragmentation of contemporary culture. As the figure of the man of letters diversified into the expert (the ‘natural philosopher’, for example, into the ‘scientist’ and the ‘philosopher’), the essay as literary or scientific tool increasingly seemed fit for no purpose in particular, an amphibious genre whose ability to move between environments seemed maladapted to a milieu in which only the specialist thrived. Writing in 1923, George Marr traced the beginning of the periodical essay’s demise at the end of the eighteenth century to a decline in the culture of consensus and to rapidly changing reading practices:

It was not till the last decade or so of the eighteenth century, when new forces were being brought to bear on society and stirring it to its depths, that men were no longer satisfied with the little moral essay, the little didactic tale, the evergreen Eastern allegory, and the imaginary “characters” drawn for their improvement, but called for a stronger and more varied literary diet. And then that particular form of the essay became extinct.¹⁸

Marr depicts the passing of the genre as a kind of cultural enclosure, with the essay’s common ground being broken up and repurposed by more dedicated literary forms that borrowed elements and developed them in ways that the original format could not. The first and most obvious of these genres was the novel, which, by expanding the little didactic tale’ and ‘evergreen Eastern allegory’ into richer, longer and more sophisticated narratives, ‘sucked the essay dry [...].’¹⁹ Secondly, the rise of criticism and heavyweight reviews such as the *Edinburgh*, the *Quarterly* and *Blackwood’s* in the early nineteenth century dwarfed the relatively modest critical efforts of the eighteenth-century periodical essay. The third and most significant cause in the eclipse of the essay, however, was the rise of the magazine, which, with its greater size and wider range of interests, offered an ‘infinitely varied dietary of story and article [...].’²⁰

One significant consequence of the essay’s perceived failure to be either sufficiently focused and serious (like the critical review) or satisfyingly varied and entertaining (like the magazine), was an increasing tendency for the genre to turn in on itself, evacuating ‘content’ in favour of self-conscious reflection. In this way, by restyling itself as a form of meta-media,

¹⁸ George S. Marr, *The Periodical Essayists of the Eighteenth Century* (London: James Clark & Co., 1923), 11.

¹⁹ Marr, *Periodical Essayists*, 249.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 253.

the essay acquired surplus value as a cultural commodity. As pure commentary, it was free to cover any subject with no unity of method other than an ever-present awareness of its own status as cultural mediator: “‘We are nothing, if not critical,’” Hazlitt writes in ‘The Periodical Press’: ‘Be it so: but then let us be critical, or we shall be nothing.’²¹ Consequently, as Leigh Hunt notes in the *Indicator*, the essayist becomes a doubled figure, a purveyor of everything and ‘nothing’. The aim of the essay, he claims,

[...] is to be modest: it is to be expressive: it is to be new: it is to be striking: it is to have something in it equally intelligible to the man of plain understanding, and surprising for the man of imagination:—in a word, it is to be impossible.

How far we have succeeded in the attainment of this happy nonentity, we leave others to judge.’²²

Both Hazlitt’s depiction of periodical writing as ‘nothing’ but criticism and Hunt’s image of a ‘happy nonentity’ invert Drake’s idea of the essay as cultural digest in response to what they perceive to be its ‘impossible’ task: to be all things to all people and still be distinctive. They also reflect what Duncan has identified as the abstracted nothingness at the heart of the contemporary notion of ‘common life,’ which in turn becomes ‘a medium at once transparent and opaque,’ an abstraction, a “‘nothing’”.²³ This conception of common life as a kind of nothingness ultimately stems from Hume’s sceptical withdrawal of a reality principle from the quotidian. Hume’s argument that everyday belief had no metaphysical foundation moved him to situate thought at the unstable boundary of fiction and belief, where, as Duncan puts it, ‘[o]ur sentimental investment in common life’ and customs is ‘framed by the fitful, uneven knowledge of their fictiveness.’²⁴ While Duncan focuses his attention upon the ways in which Romantic fiction comes to embody and represent this ‘nothing’ at the heart of empirical reality, Hunt’s and Hazlitt’s ruminations suggest that the essay in this period was no less involved in exploring the doublings of consciousness required to maintain the reflective and the quotidian in productive dialogue, in an epistemological form of suspended animation. For Hume, such doubling was largely a pragmatic matter, in that it made communication and getting on with everyday life possible. Hazlitt, however, saw in it a

²¹ Hazlitt, *Works*, XVI, 213.

²² Leigh Hunt, *The Indicator and the Companion; A Miscellany for the Fields and the Fire-Side*, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1834), I, 1-2.

²³ Duncan, *Scott’s Shadow*, 117.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 123.

potential source of re-enchantment, a basis for transcending the conditions of a mechanised, alienated consciousness – in other words, as a source of possible sublimity.

At the heart of the idea of the essay as a ‘happy nonentity,’ then, is a paradox. Struggling against the professionalization of the relationship between writer and reader and the commodification of the work of literature, Hazlitt nonetheless relied upon that economy for his literary livelihood. The product of this contradiction, as has been widely noted since Raymond Williams, is a ‘super-reality’ theory of art based upon imaginative truth and projected towards an ‘Ideal Reader’ who was capable of approaching literary works non-instrumentally.²⁵ By idealising the sympathetic function of the work of art and the audience that engaged with it, the Romantic essayist engages in what Klancher describes as a kind of ‘audience-making,’ itself a form of ‘cultural capitalism’, producing a value-added commodity in which aesthetic experience was configured not as an ideological position but ‘a mode of reception and comprehension,’ a ‘reading habit.’²⁶ As literary quantity is refined into quality, intersubjective consensus and epistemic solidarity is replaced by aesthetic activity as the ultimate foundation of cultural and epistemological norms.

In this respect, at least, Hazlitt’s aesthetic model for the essay parallels that of publications such as *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* and the *London Magazine*, both of which respond to anxieties surrounding literary commodification by producing surplus epistemic value in the form of self-conscious intellectualism.²⁷ As Klancher argues, by doing so these publications sought to redeem ‘social and psychological fragmentation by recollectively bouncing back toward a fusion with the self’s own ultimate ground’—a ground that was itself transcendental and putatively apolitical.²⁸ Similarly, by sophisticating the literary product with an ineffable aesthetics of ‘power’ and ‘common sense’, Hazlitt endeavours to transcend its material conditions. Like Hume and Johnson before him, he presents the essay and essaying as a prototype for human experience as a whole. While Hume and Johnson had attempted to consolidate the normative order that underpinned such experience, however, Hazlitt seeks to transcend that order through an aestheticized form of social empiricism. The aura of ‘nothingness’ that surrounded the essay was no longer the transparent medium of common life, but instead the privileged sphere of aesthetic contemplation that he outlines in ‘On the Pleasure of Painting’:

²⁵ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), 35.

²⁶ Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences*, 33.

²⁷ Duncan notes that John Gibson Lockhart’s interest in Friedrich Schlegel led him to the ‘figure of a transcendental subject—a “national mind”’, displacing political intent into purely aesthetic purposiveness’ (*Scott’s Shadow*, 56).

²⁸ Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences*, 58.

I have more satisfaction in my own thoughts than in dictating them to others: words are necessary to explain the impression of certain things upon me to the reader, but they rather weaken and draw a veil over than strengthen it to myself. [...] The ideas we cherish most exist best in a kind of shadowy abstraction,

“Pure in the last recesses of the mind;”

and derive neither force nor interest from being exposed to public view. They are old familiar acquaintance, and any change in them, arising from the adventitious ornaments of style or dress, is little to their advantage.²⁹

Romanticising the form and content of the familiar essay involved moving the social intuition theorised by the Scottish Enlightenment indoors, into the private domain of consciousness and individual imagination, of inexpressible impressions and shadowy abstractions. In Hazlitt’s work the essayist mediates less between social formations and more between idealised phenomenological realms of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ experience. Consequently, the ludic indeterminacy of Hazlitt’s imagination is typically oriented by an aesthetic, not a social purposiveness: its playfulness signifies not the pragmatic presuppositions of communication (as it had in Hume), but the dark foundations of consciousness and identity. Thus, although Hazlitt’s professed attempt to incorporate familiar conversation into the style of the essay superficially echoes the socialising objectives of Addison and Hume, his aesthetics takes the familiar essay in an entirely new direction. While the operations of the eighteenth-century essay sought to underpin sociability by buttressing the conventions of a polite and commercial society, in Hazlitt the gesture of the Romantic essayist postulates a higher, unattainable unity that transcends the social. By aestheticising (or, borrowing Duncan’s terminology, *lyricising*) the liminal, diplomatic intellect of its eighteenth-century precursors, the sublime performance of the Romantic familiar essay acquires significance not as a pragmatic regulator of communication, but as the hypostatized other of a lost wholeness that surpasses public discourse. By transforming Hume’s ideal of conversable intersubjectivity into an incommunicable depth of subjectivity, Hazlitt exchanges an essayism of liminality for an essayism of the sublime.

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²⁹ Hazlitt, *Works*, VIII, 6-7.